

Strategic Competence and Agency: Individuals Overcoming Barriers to Change in South African Higher Education

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Abstract: Social relations, institutional arrangements and cultures bequeathed by South Africa's system of apartheid continue to be felt in the present despite the country's formal transition to democracy almost 25 years ago. Race, class and gender inequities continue to structure South African society in ways that have proven intransigent to change, leading to growing frustration and widespread public dissatisfaction expressed in multiple arenas including worker strikes, service delivery and university student protests. While it is clear that social structures inherited from the past are difficult to change, it is also the case that change does happen. In this paper, we discuss the findings of a hermeneutic phenomenological study with 10 academics at one historically white university in South Africa, who have been agents of change within their particular context. We show how participants engaged in struggles to counter resistance to their efforts. In doing so they demonstrate what we call 'strategic competence' – the ability to act in ways that draw not only on personal resources but recognise the resources, contradictions and opportunities offered within the existing limitations of the social structure. Strategic competence thus emerges as a central feature of agency, enabling individuals to stretch the boundaries of what is possible.

Key words: agency; resistance; transformation; strategic competence; higher education; South Africa.

Introduction

The end of the apartheid in South Africa and the transition to a democracy in 1994, left the post 1994 South African government with the need to eradicate discriminatory apartheid policies and since 1994 there have been wide-ranging efforts to address these inequalities structurally, culturally, institutionally and inter-personally. The higher education sector has been no exception¹. Following an incident in February 2008 involving a group of four White male students at the University of the Free State, forcing some support (cleaning) staff at the University to eat food that one of the students had apparently urinated in -- the then Minister of Education established a

committee to ‘investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions with a particular focus on racism and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and promote social cohesion’². The report noted some progress with regard to transformation of higher education particularly in relation to student demographics, but argued that deeply embedded legacies of apartheid continue to enable the persistence of inequalities and resistance to transformation³.

Similarly, the rise in student movements and protests across universities in South Africa with themes like #RhodesMustFall, #RhodesSoWhite, #FeesMustFall is indicative of this lack of structural transformation and the pervasiveness of racism and inequality in Universities⁴. Among the demands of the 2015/2016 protest that occurred across universities in South Africa, was the need to transform especially historically white institutions⁵. The protests are an indication of the inequalities and exclusionary structures prevalent in South African universities. The institutional cultures of many historically white universities in South Africa have been said to be ‘White’ and/or ‘male’ in character which poses a difficult challenge to the transformation imperative⁶. While transformation on a demographic level is integral to restructuring and transforming higher education, a complete transformation requires a total overhaul of those structures and cultures that promote discrimination and allow for the persistence of attitudes and practices that perpetuate the marginalisation of some and advantage others⁷. In a historically white South African University where the norm is predominantly White and male, it may be especially difficult to change such structures and cultures and rid them of exclusionary racist and sexist mores.

‘Transformation’ is a moniker which, in South Africa, refers not just to greater inclusion of disadvantaged groups but also to changing the structure, practices,

processes and cultures that enable discrimination and inequality, requiring changes in the values, norms, attitudes, perceptions, behaviour and dominant practices that prevail in any particular institutional setting⁸. Thus, a ‘transformed’ university would be one that has developed a new set of ‘rules of the game’⁹ (structures, cultures and practices) informing academic life in ways that accommodate and incorporate the diverse experiences of individuals in the university rather than being a reflection of world views and practices that reflect white male domination.

However, it has been noted that these structures and cultures are very difficult to change and that attempts at change will meet with resistance. Cassim¹⁰ notes that transforming structures is a difficult and slow process especially at the level of discriminatory micro practices embedded in day-to-day social interactions. Universities, in common with other social institutions, are thus a site of conflict between those who want to accelerate change and those who resist change. While a number of studies have noted the resistance to, and slow pace of, transformation within South African universities, few have discussed how individuals are able to take action to effect change, how action aimed at change is resisted and how agents of change are able to negotiate and counter resistance.

We argue in this article that deployment of agency involves agents of change engaged in struggles and conflicts to counter resistance to their efforts and that agency is the ability of an agent to exercise a degree of control over the social relations (including conflicts) within the fields in which they find themselves¹¹. The outcome of such battles, we propose here, is dependent on the ‘strategic competence’ of actors within the field — given that individuals have different interests, differential access to resources and occupy different positions, the university is an institutional context that

consists of different enabling and limiting conditions within which configuration individual agents must devise ways of achieving their goals. Successful agents are those who possess ‘strategic competence’ — the ability to negotiate this terrain of ongoing conflicts and to engage context-specific strategies to achieve their goals.

This paper forms part of a larger study that seeks to understand ‘how academic staff have agency to effect transformation within contexts of limited resources and resistance’. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenology method, the paper draws on the narratives of 11 academic staff at one historically white university who have taken action aimed at transforming a particular sector of the university. The paper focuses on one finding, the ‘strategic competence’ of agents which became evident in our analysis of participant narratives. The process of analysing participants transformative acts led to strategic competence as one means through which transformative change is achieved. Hence the ways in which participants actions revealed strategic competence is discussed rather than focusing on their actions as this would be beyond the scope of the paper.

A limitation of the study was the predominant of white participants. While the sampling method used (purposive sampling) required a sample that has experienced the phenomenon being investigated rather than controlling for representativeness statistically¹². If having agency is tied to having access to power and resources, the fact that individuals endowed with power to effect change are predominantly white men speaks to an underlying problem. This implies that there is no shift in the transformation practices as power is still located in the hands of one group. The fact that the white and male body predominantly has access to the needed power and resources to effect change speaks to an underlying problem with the current transformation trajectory.

Below, we discuss the conceptual framing of the study, we highlight the link between the conflicts that arise in fields and the strategic accumulation of resources as integral to an individual's ability to effect change within such fields. We then describe the methodological processes and finally discuss the findings and sub-themes regarding the role of strategic competence in the transformation process.

Conceptual Framing

This paper uses Bourdieu's concept of field, specifically the conflicts that occurs within fields to understand how participants negotiated resistance to their efforts at transformation. Conflicts arise in social settings which are, inevitably, populated by individuals with different interests, views, ideas and ideologies competing for resources, seeking to gain access to power and defending their interests¹³. The conflict between what Margaret Archer¹⁴ refers to as morphogenesis (or transformation) and morphostasis (or reproduction) plays out in day-to-day social interactions. Bourdieu described social interactions as occurring in 'arenas of conflicts' which he called 'fields'¹⁵ and which are constituted of a mix of constraints and enablements that individuals within these social relations encounter as they seek to further their interests and achieve their goals.

Fields can be seen as arenas where dominant and subordinate groups struggle for control over resources¹⁶. Within particular fields individuals occupy positions that provide the condition for action¹⁷. The university can be described as a field of social relations — 'a network or a configuration of objective relations between positions' and these objective conditions of existence impose upon those who occupy them constraints, and are characterised by particular distributions and types of power which shape access to the 'particular profits that are on offer in any particular field'¹⁸. Bourdieu and

Wacquant¹⁹ further argue that the rules governing fields are specific to different fields, places or societies. Fields, rather than denoting specific material structures as in university buildings or disciplinary fields, denotes a complex set of power relations among and between individuals within specific contexts²⁰. It is within this field that agents act in response to the structural and cultural relations and practices that define the field. Conceptualising the university as a field enables an examination of the ‘latent patterns of interest and struggle that shape the existence of these empirical realities’ of participants taking action towards change²¹. In the South African context, fields are prominently influenced by the legacies of apartheid which privileged one race, class, gender and sexuality over the other – and provide the conditions for conflict in a field where race, class and gender define social relations. Conflicts are often between more privileged groups and less privileged groups who struggle over the accumulation and mobilisation of resources²². The ability to transform or reproduce the social relations within such fields is dependent on, or rather influenced by, successful strategic accumulation of such resources.

‘Strategy’ is intentional action drawing on the opportunities provided by a specific context while also being able to understand and work within the limitations of the context. When an actor demonstrates strategic ‘competence’ their actions ‘yield an intended outcome, informed by a strategic assessment of the relevant context in which strategy occurs and upon which it subsequently²³. Strategic competence is demonstrated by those who are able to take into consideration the consequences of various courses of action as well as understanding both the constraining and enabling features of the context when choosing to act impinges’²⁴. Agency here is thus seen as ‘the capacity for humans to act in their own right’; it is conscious goal-directed activity²⁵; an individual’s

ability to exercise some degree of control over the social relations which they find themselves in²⁶. This further implies agency's reproductive as well as transformative capacities.

The Study

The study is situated in historically white university the implication of which is that the university has to deal with an institutional culture which has been characterised as 'White'. The University locates its agenda for transformation within the context of transformation in South Africa and the wider project of the eradication of apartheid discriminatory legacies. However, while there has been demographic inclusion, this is located at the lower levels -- staff in senior positions are overwhelming White and male. According to the University's 2015 statistics, as at 2014, 71% of professors were men, 94% White, 4% African, 4% Coloured and 2% Indian. Also, between 2004 and 2015, a number of policies were designed to address issues of equity, discrimination and the effect apartheid legacies. These efforts notwithstanding, the experiences of some Black students and staff reveal a deeply entrenched masculine and White culture²⁷ that persists in the day-to-day practices of the institution.

Participant Demographics			
Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Position
West	White	Male	Professor
Inga	Black	Female	Professor
Max	Black	Male	Executive
Carol	White	Female	Professor
Kathy	White	Female	Senior Lecturer

Chris	White	Male	Professor
Dana	White	Female	Professor
Tracy	White	Female	Lecturer
James	White	Male	Lecturer
Alex	White	Male	Professor

The study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand how individual academic staff members experienced having agency to effect transformation given the context described above. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry taken here acknowledges the need to interpret human experiences in context²⁸. The aim of the study was to give individuals who have taken action aimed at transformation of the existing structures, relations and practices of the university context in which they find themselves, the opportunity to tell their story and talk about their experiences of what had enabled and/or constrained their ability/willingness/capacity to take action in this way. The paper reports on the findings of a study with 10 in-depth interviews with academics who have taken action deemed ‘transformatory’ in their context, specifically the ways in which they negotiated enabling and limiting conditions within their contexts. The sampling method chosen (purposive sampling) aimed at identifying individuals who self-identify or have been identified by others in their setting, as having made an effort to contribute to the transformation process in the university²⁹. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the aim of participant selection is to select participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and are willing to talk about such experiences³⁰.

The in-depth interviews explored participants' experiences of agency and what enabled or constrained, in their view, their efforts at engaging in actions aimed at effecting transformation of some kind of existing structures, practices, norms or procedures within the domain in which they operate as academics and the ways they negotiated such experiences. We employed purposeful sampling aimed at identifying individuals who self-identify or have been identified by others in their setting, as having made an effort to contribute to the transformation process in the university³¹. Because we wanted to focus on actions that might be regarded as significant, we were interested to identify actions oriented towards the core business or mission of the university: that is to say, related to teaching and learning, research, governance, management and/or community engagement. Participants were identified through consultation with divisions such as the Community Engagement Office, Research office, Teaching and Learning Centre and the Society for Female Academics (SFA). Participant demographics included four White women, one Black woman, five White men and one Black man. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The goal was an understanding of participants' experience of having agency to effect change and realise their goals in the context of the structures and cultures prevailing in the field in which they operate. A hermeneutic phenomenological reading of the data entailed becoming familiar with the data (multiple readings), coding the data and identifying themes that illuminate participants' experience of the phenomenon being studied in order to explicate the structure of that phenomenon³². During the process of analysis, rather imposing our assumptions on participants stories, we choose to interrogate the ethics within the stories being told. Acknowledging one's assumptions enables the researcher to incorporate such assumptions into their understanding of the data or story and this may lead to new meaning, knowledge and understanding. To

interrogate the ethics within the stories is to allow both contextual and personal/individual constructs into the interpretation process. As Landgren³³ notes, the role of the hermeneutic phenomenological researcher is to interpret the text rather than judge the text for its correctness. Thematic analysis revealed ‘strategic competence’ to be an important element in participants’ experiences of having agency to effect transformation in ways that we describe in more detail in what follows.

Discussion

Bob Jessop³⁴ argues that agents have the capacity to engage in strategic calculations amid limiting and constraining conditions and successful agents are those who possess ‘strategic competence’. An agent is strategic in selecting what actions he or she takes and competent when their selected actions and interpretations result in successful outcomes. Thus, to be a successful agent is to be strategically competent, to always be looking for ways to achieve a specific goal regardless of obstacles encountered and, at least some of the time, succeeding. Agents learn strategic competence through their experience during interactions in the social system. Strategically competent actors wishing to bring about change will encounter equally competent strategists seeking to reproduce the status quo. Strategically competent actors know when to drive their ideas, when to be assertive, which battles to expend energy on, and which not to.

Analysis of the data revealed several key features which characterise the strategically competent actor: a reflexive attitude regarding past mistakes and the ability to learn from them; the ability to question the taken for granted and ‘see’ ways in which status quo normalising and legitimising narratives work to reproduce inequities and effectively to render these visible to others; the ability to out-manoeuvre competitors

by drawing on insight into the opportunities that the context offers up (for example to forge alliances and win over opponents) and thus choosing actions that are context-appropriate; and having courage and being able to overcome fear — for instance of being ridiculed.

Learning from mistakes

... in one case, I did not realise how critical what was happening was ... and I let a battle go that if I had gone in with my full weight and not been distracted by things that were happening at the moment — if I had understood how critical that was, we would probably be in a better position now. But that is again a strategic blunder if you like...I seemed to not realise what repercussions losing the battle would have ... and I did not put enough energy into that battle at the beginning (West).

That's the one that I should have really fought, in terms of trying to persuade my colleagues, not at the leadership level, that's not where the issue got stuck, but at the middle levels... I should have paid far more attention to driving this programme and really persuading colleagues and also rebutting the rejections and saying that they were trivial (Max).

In narrating some challenges faced when taking actions effect change, West and Max describe the role of learning from failures in becoming strategically competent. Agents learn strategic competence through their experience during interactions in the social system. Sometimes as West notes, agents make 'strategic blunders' — not succeeding in achieving their goals, not because of being afraid to act but because of not making the right strategic choice about where to channel their energy. West's account speaks to the fact that agents may sometimes have limited personal resources and must make good strategic choices about how to use those resources if they are to achieve an outcome which they regard as optimal. But what we see in these accounts is that strategic competence is learned over time — with agents reflecting on their blunders and using these experiences to become more adept at recognising when to act and which battles to prioritise. Successful agents thus possess high degrees of reflexive self-awareness which

extends also to an ability to reflect critically on the context and its taken-for-granted norms. To be strategically competent is to know when to drive our ideas, to know when to be assertive, to know when to put our energy into battles and when not to.

Questioning the taken-for-granted

When things are taken for granted, by definition, they are hard to perceive. It is only through close analysis and questioning by agents of change that the norm becomes visible and therefore rendered available for change.

...I asked a question about transformation and what are the policies that are happening at the University here regarding transformation and there was an immediate change in the sound of the whole amphitheatre, a change in its tone and I was told very quickly that this is not an academically relevant subject, that the gathering was only about academic matters (Chris).

But I didn't see it as quality assurance as efficiency, I always saw it as quality assurance as transformation...I'd say that the single biggest thing that I was able to achieve in relation to change was when I managed to persuade the Senate that assessment was really important (Carol).

Chris describes here a very common discursive strategy deployed in the service of reproduction of the status quo which has to do with the power to define — for instance to define what is and is not an 'academic' question, to define what a committee or meeting is for, to define what the terms of debate are and what will and will not be allowable items for discussion. Agents of morphostasis are able to reproduce structures by refusing to engage questions that may upset the way things are. In this context, strategic competence lies in the ability of an agent to put forward and have accepted *their* preferred definition of a term or course of action. Agents of change speak and act in ways that illuminate what would otherwise remain occluded. Foucault³⁵ argues that

the process of ‘practicing criticism’ or questioning the taken for granted means rejecting what is accepted as ‘self-evident’. For examples, Carol saw the contested notion of ‘quality assurance’ as having transformational potential and was able to win traction for interpreting the term in this way as opposed to the dominant understanding of quality assurance as efficiency. Scott³⁶ argues that agents do not so much take over a place, as forge residence in it. Carol’s view of quality assurance as transformation and her efforts to instil this view in the university as *its* preferred definition can be described as an act of ‘forging residence’ — that is to say rather than simply fitting in with the prescriptions of the context, shifting its parameters, in a small way.

Managing fear

There is a constant fear that one is inadequate, I don’t know how many women in leadership positions have said to me I feel like a fraud so it is managing that fear, fear constricts, shuts things down (Kathy).

Agents acting in ways that question and threaten taken-for-granted norms and assumptions can be the target of personal attacks and must often thus overcome fear in order to insist on acting — as Kathy puts it, to ‘stand firm’ — regardless of how others respond to them.

I think the key one would be that for me, problems and challenges become obstacles to transformation when there is an element of fear that then breeds resistance of some kind and so that here operates at a range of levels. So, if I have learnt anything in the midst of those kinds of challenges it is how you deal with the conflicts that transformation will give rise to...And sometimes the times when I feel the greatest shifts have happened is when I have been able to stand firm in the face of enormous fear or conflicts and invite a compassionate conversation by avoiding my own fear and choosing to rather work with the possibilities that I see in the situation. So, for me another part of what I have learnt is the possibilities of conflicts, the creative and potentially positive possibilities of conflicts (Kathy).

People sometimes experience what we do as an imposition and then they start arguing back and if they can't take the argument back at an intellectual level then in the past certainly there was a reduction to sarcasm: stupid horrible comments which can be very hurtful, very hurtful (Carol).

Portnoi³⁷ argues that an important part of changing institutional cultures is changing the mind-sets of those within the institution, especially those of the previously dominant groups³⁸. Echoing this point, the report of the ministerial committee on transformation noted that many universities are characterized by a culture of silence, fear and victimisation and as a result of this there has been little progress with respect to transformation⁴⁹. The report noted that White staff and students were anxious about transformation because they were afraid of the future and for Black staff and students, anxiety arose from the fear of being victimised which promoted a culture of silence within universities⁴⁴. Actors who succeed in effecting changes in the face of resistance will be those who are able to overcome these fears.

Choosing context-appropriate forms of engagement

So, when you arrive at an institution and when you are wanting to bring about changes, you have to have a very deep and close insight into the particular university. Where are the centres of power and how are you going to be approaching issues? What's going to be the likely pace of changes? What are going to be the facilitating conditions? What is going to be constraining? Which social groups and actors are likely to constrain and oppose you and for what reasons? Who is likely to support you and for what reasons? These are major strategic and tactical issues that you have to put your head around in terms of systematically undertaking a programme of transformation. So, this is a general principle, understand the terrain, understand the context, understand who is comfortable with conditions and who is alienated from those conditions, and so on. And then work out your strategy and tactics in terms of how you are going to intervene in this kind of state of affairs in order to bring about those desirable changes (Max).

Choosing a context-appropriate form of engagement may for instance involve

observation and listening to people because the realities of power prevent more forceful acts⁴¹. Max, for all that he occupied a position of power and influence, realised that issuing a directive would not be useful. Hence his decision to employ a different strategy. As Max emphasised, important to being a strategically competent agent is understanding the structures and context in which one acts or interacts⁴². To be strategic is to be able to use one's personal power to activate structural mechanisms towards change. Sometimes knowing the ropes enables an agent to use structures to his or her advantage. An agent who is able to understand the context, is able to strategically take actions to achieve his or her goal. This is related to 'having experience' and 'knowing the ropes' such that experience, knowing the ropes and understanding the terrain allows for the agent to take strategic actions. Knowing the ropes or understanding the terrain is similar to Giddens' 'rules': he argues that for an actor to employ such rules and resources and utilise them in social interaction, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the rules⁴³. This knowledge and understanding informed Max's decisions on how to respond to what he found problematic with the system he encountered when taking up a position at the university.

I didn't arrive at work on the first day and send a letter to every part of the university and to every academic to say as of the 1st of June the term non-Whites shall no longer exist. I bided my time, and I slowly raised it when I was ready (Max).

Max understands the university context and that issuing a directive would not be useful. Hence, the decision to employ a different strategy — engaging with the people in his context rather than issuing directives. Max chooses a more circuitous strategy which is, nonetheless, successful — he is able to achieve his goal of changing the nomenclature that had previously commonly been employed.

Thus, strategically competent agency is revealed in a variety of (more and less overt) forms of action which agents engage in based on their insight into what is possible within the context in which they find themselves.

I'm a blank face but that doesn't mean that my head is blank. I will not express what I want to tell you, because I am not, I am not going to get into a street fight, I'm not a street-smart person, so I will not fight with you. I will just stay quiet, but I will do what I have to do and that is exactly what I have done. So, if I don't fight back a system that is not empowering....it is about breaking spirits (Inga).

For Inga, the choice to remain silent or give a blank face or remain 'passive' is a position adopted in order to maintain her position and not get into 'street fights' because she feels that she is not 'street smart'. Inga chooses to fight in a subtle way — she makes her face literally blank so that it cannot be read easily. Carol similarly points to her awareness of the need to consciously think about how to achieve one's strategic goals:

But then the other thing is that sometimes you have to be strategic, pick up on things because they are going to help you get to a bigger goal (Carol).

Strategically competent actors are knowledgeable about their contexts and the conditions which influence their experiences⁴⁴. An understanding of the rules/structure and the discourses that are inherent in a specific context, thus enables such an actor. Having knowledge of the rules and how resources work enables the agent to deploy structural mechanisms to enable social change⁴⁵ So, Carol being able to 'understand the system and pick up on things', enables her to manipulate and use structures in different ways to 'help get to a bigger goal'. In that sense while structures themselves do not necessarily enable the agent, structures can be enabling if the individual understands the terrain and how it works and is able to deploy this understanding successfully in the

pursuit of specific goals.

Yeah so, I think another thing that has been personally enabling in my work is to be quite frank, to be a White woman, you know White women are often seen as sort of the nurturing teachers and I think that has allowed easier access to certain spaces and how I work (Dana).

Dana refers to a different form of strategy where actors use their positions to effect change. In the South African context, the historical relations which continue to be seen over 20 years after the end of apartheid, positions one group as more powerful than the other, granting them access to power, privilege and resources⁴⁶. This also points to knowledgeable agents acting within social structures — they are able to use their positions because they understand the rules of the game and know the resources needed to realise their interests⁴⁷. Giddens⁴⁸ highlights actors' knowledge in relation to their context as important to their ability to reproduce or transform structural relations. Agents who possess various forms of strategic competence derived from their understanding of, and positioning in, the contexts and structural relations within the system, are able to deploy these competencies to achieve their goals.

The relationship between an actor's position and being enabled and limited within a specific context has been highlighted as pertinent to agency⁴⁹. As has been argued, structures, while limiting, also provide enabling conditions and the strategic competence of the participants is revealed in their ability to use such enablement's — for instance race/gender to act to achieve their goals. For example, while there is an acknowledgment of the ways in which (racist/patriarchal) structures tend to reproduce themselves, some of the participants understand, and are able to use, their (privileged) race, gender and/or class position strategically to take action towards change. Dana is for instance able to use her whiteness to her advantage. In this particular context, her

race is a resource which can be used to engender transformation — although it might be argued that at the same time, doing so reproduces rather than unsettles the privileging of whiteness.

Inga understands that the field is a constrained one, but on the basis of this understanding is able to take strategic steps to get what she wants:

Because the field is constrained and very restrictive in its own ways...and initially in your career everyone has to draw the line. You have to do what the system requires you to do before you can transform slowly with time and with gaining the momentum of people and confidence of people before a movement can start for something positive to come out of it (Inga).

The decision to ‘do what the system requires you to do’ while revealing the limiting nature of structures and the degree of constraints placed on actors who want to do things differently, also reveals agency⁵⁰. Inga is not simply complying but is rather biding her time before taking action at a time that she feels will best be suited to achieving her goals. Her agency lies in her understanding of the need to ‘draw the line’ and to comply with the requirements of the system before acting. It is in that very act/strategy of ‘doing what the system requires’ before taking action to transform that her agency is revealed.

Thus, agency lies in the ability to realise what is needed to act, to strategise and then to act accordingly at an optimal moment. As Scott⁵¹ writes, ‘most subordinates conform and obey, not because they have internalised the norms of the dominant, but because a structure of surveillance, reward, and punishment makes it prudent for them to comply’. The point is that Inga’s realisation of the later possibilities for transformative action enabled her choice to do what the system requires initially. Thus, agents encountering strategies to resist change in any particular setting will require

strategic knowledge of the setting, of its norms and expectations and its social relations if they are to succeed in achieving their goals despite the resistance they encounter.

Knowing and choosing which battles to fight points to their strategic competence and ability to know how to fight without becoming so damaged that they would lose in the end.

Winning hearts and minds

I went around the Department and I went into peoples' offices and I sat down with each member of staff and said to them, why are we fighting each other so much? And out of that, a conversation began...we have since then found ways of talking to each other so that we now have established a shared project (Tracy).

Power does not just come from role, position or responsibility; it lies in the strategic ability to convince and persuade people to see one's point of view. Of course, a host of factors play a role in this act of persuasion — for instance race, age, gender, experience and position but in all cases, to act requires of someone to make a choice, the outcome of which cannot be known in advance.

Strategic competence is the ability of the individual to win the hearts and minds of others within the context; it is to have the power and acumen to persuade others to see one's position. Actors within conflicting systems have to find a way of negotiating this terrain to achieve their goals as is evident in Tracy's story. Similarly, Alex and Max:

...it is your ability to convince the committee members that what is happening is wrong and we need to change it and we need to change it in these ways. So, it is a power of persuasion, not a power of acting (Alex).

You have to take people along with you. You have to constantly be persuading people intellectually about the kinds of changes that are needed, why they need it and what good things will come if we embrace

those changes. You have to be very careful about ruling by administrative fiat. That from tomorrow it shall be like this or from next week, the following will happen, you know, rather than really building consensus and persuading people and winning their support and ensuring that they are with you (Max).

Although Alex draws a distinction between acting and persuading, clearly, as Max explains, in universities, a great deal of acting comes in the form of persuading.

Individuals who want to effect change have to find ways of engaging with those who might resist change or place barriers and obstacles in the way of change. They do this by trying to persuade, negotiate, win the argument and win over the hearts and minds of potential allies and enemies within the system. As Krause⁵² argues, the possibility of agents accomplishing any particular action is dependent on how such action is interpreted by others. Power here is defined not in terms of resistance but as ‘a form of capability’⁵³. The capacity to persuade is a subtle form of action to win the argument rather than engaging in open confrontation. Beckert⁵⁴ describes this as a ‘strategic agency’: the ability to influence other people, meaning that the process of negotiating with, and persuading others is a strategic adaptation by agents to get others to interpret their proposed actions in a positive manner so as to bring about change.

Giddens⁵⁵ argues that power presumes a certain form of autonomy and interdependence between individuals and groups in the social system. Thus, the most powerful individuals may rely on the least powerful for their agency⁵⁶. To effect transformation thus implies winning the hearts and minds of others and to do so requires a certain capability in the agent— but this capability is in part structurally determined/shaped.

So, you can’t mandate anything at a university, you know you can’t force anybody to do anything, you have literally got to, in my

experience, you have got to win the argument. My strategy had been, let's talk, let's talk, let's win the hearts and minds (Carol).

It is difficult partly because I had to collaborate with five or six colleagues and not all of them are equally committed to the ideas in this course. There are quite a lot of things going on, herding cats, to bring everyone to this vision, if it is your vision, it feels like you are imposing your vision on other people, it has to be a negotiation (James).

You have to negotiate to get others to accept your vision of change. To negotiate is to persuade, to win hearts and minds. The power to persuade is then the capacity for an actor to achieve the desired goal where such achievement is dependent on the agency of others⁵⁷. Thus, the act of 'building consensus', 'winning hearts and minds', 'collaborating with colleagues', or 'having willing parties', is a central strategic capacity which enhances the power of agents to achieve their goals. Successful persuasion and the ability to negotiate requires considerable skill as it rests on the capacity of agents to 'engage with the disposition of others' in order to take action⁵⁸. Revealed in the narratives is the link between agency and an individual's social position in relation to certain contexts. In South African Universities, having freedom or agency to enact change is contingent on certain bodies where for instance having access to enough funds or being able to persuade/influence the governing body is tied to race and gender where whites and men in particular have access⁵⁹. The implication is that there needs to be a shift so as to enable the 'other' have access to the needed resources to contribute the transformation process.

Strategic competence is however not only displayed by agents of transformation, there is a degree of strategy implied in the reproduction of relations of domination. In an academic setting, resistance often operates at the level of drawing on normalising prescriptions to refuse ideas about change and in this way the structure is able to

reproduce itself⁶⁰. This type of resistance is often difficult to locate/recognise because it is subsumed within legitimate discourses of ‘excellence’ and ‘best’⁶¹. As a result of this invisibility, there is a failure to recognise how prejudice is perpetuated based on standards that parade as universal but are in reality raced, classed and gendered⁶². This way, the system able to maintain itself by renegotiating power relations to suit its interests. What is however evident here is the agency of participants, revealed in their ability to be strategically savvy in light of sometimes subtle and intellectual forms of resistance.

Conclusion

Agency is understood as taking place in the interaction between agents in specific contexts. The hermeneutic phenomenological perspective taken here sees agency unfolding through the experiences of people who find themselves situated in specific contexts. It examines the actions of individuals as embedded within their structural relations and interactions. The university as an institution is understood here as fractured — characterised by differing interests, powers and goals which leads to conflicts within the system. Agents react to, and interact with, these conflicts in varying ways, depending on their own consciousness, goals and interests. The stories that are told here reveal participants’ engagement with structures and how understanding of such structures activated their agency — what is described here as ‘strategic competence’ based on this knowledge and understanding.

As Lightfoot et al.⁶³ argue, individuals do not necessarily respond to situations in a prescribed or uniform manner, rather they respond in an organic and opportunistic way to new opportunities and social relationships that are perceived as beneficial to their own interests. These acts of seeking new opportunities, creating new or alternative

fields for action, happen in the context of their status within the university, their position, their race, their gender and so on. Their agency lies in their ability to work with these limitations and enablement's in a strategic way. Rather than seeing the site as purely limiting, agents work with the conditions to enable their actions to achieve their goals. Such individuals are able to create/forged territories/zones to enable them successfully to negotiate the conflicts and fractured-ness of the university field in which they are located.

Strategic competence, though important to the transformation process, is not only possessed by agents of transformation but (albeit differentially) by all actors within the field. This makes the actions taken by agents of change all the more remarkable because they are able to counter forms of resistance to change which can be very difficult to see or point to. Strategically competent agents negotiate such obstacles and constraining conditions, recognise the failure of past actions and find new ways of acting to push their ideas forward. An awareness of this relative autonomy and reflexivity enriches our understanding of the creative dimension of agency.

Notes

1. Department of Education, "Report of the Ministerial Committee"; Habib, "Transcending the Past", 35.
2. Department of Education, "Report of the Ministerial Committee".
3. Seepe, "Higher Education Transformation in South Africa"; Soudien, "Grasping the Nettle?," 121.
4. Ngcobosi, "RhodesSoWhite: An Insight".
5. Africa is a Country, Shutting Down the Rainbow Nation.
6. Portnoi, "Transformative Change?," 373.
7. Govinder, Zondo, and Makgoba, "A New Look at Demographic Transformation," 1.
8. Bitzer, "Some Myths on Equity and Access", 298.

9. Hemson and Singh, "Shadows of Transformation," 937
10. Casim, "Benchmarking Equity and Diversity," 429
11. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.
12. Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*.
13. Archer, *Realist Social Theory* 1995.
14. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 1995
15. Swartz, *Culture and Power* 1997, 9
16. Dumais, "Cultural Capital, Gender, and School Success", 46.
17. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 199.
18. Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 97.
19. Bourdieu and Wacquant *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 99
20. Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 120.
21. Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 119.
22. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.
23. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 129.
24. Hay, *Political Analysis*, 132.
25. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, 19.
26. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.
27. Department of Education, *Report of the Ministerial Committee*, 13
28. van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 14
29. Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*.
30. Lavery, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology," 29
31. Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*.
32. Flood, "Understanding Phenomenology," 13.
33. Landgren, "Being the Parent of an Infant with Colic," 159.

34. Jessop, *Interpretive Sociology*, 124.
35. Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 155.
36. Scott in Silliman, "Agency, Practical Politics".
37. Portnoi, "Transformative Change?," 382
38. Fourie, "Institutional Transformation at South African Universities".
39. Department of Education, *Report of the Ministerial Committee*, 32, 90.
40. Department of Education, *Report of the Ministerial Committee*, 32, 90.
41. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 191.
42. Beckert, "Agency, Entrepreneurs, and Institutional Change", 783.
43. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 66.
44. Tucker, *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*, 71.
45. Beckert, "Agency, Entrepreneurs, and Institutional Change", 782
46. Vincent, Idahosa, and Msoni, "Disclaiming/Denigrating/Dodging"; McEwen and Steyn, "Hegemonic Epistemologies".
47. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 90.
48. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 91
49. New, "Structure, Agency and Social Transformation".
50. Fegan "Subjects of Regulation/Resistance?", 264.
51. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 193.
52. Krause, *Bodies in Action*, 308.
53. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 68, 94.
54. Beckert, "Agency, Entrepreneurs, and Institutional Change", 782
55. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 93.
56. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*.
57. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, 93.
58. Edwards and D'arcy, "Relational Agency and Disposition", 149.

59. Steyn and Foster, "Repertoires for Talking White".
60. Bevir, "Foucault and Critique".
61. Badat, "Social Justice in Higher Education".
62. Melissa Steyn and Zyl, Like "That Statue at Jammie Stairs".
63. Lightfoot, "Daily Practice and Material Culture", 202.

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